

## SACRIFICIAL ELEMENTS IN THE PURĀNIC VOWS \*

The institution of sacrifice is old as the Vedic times and the concept of *vrata* (vow) is traceable to the RV. Sacrifice (Latin *sacrificium*, *sacer* 'holy' and *facere*, to make, "to make holy") is a rite the purpose of which is to establish relations between a source of spiritual strength and one in need of such strength<sup>1</sup>. Sacrifice was at the centre of Vedic life. In the early period it was a simple rite but with the passage of time it became complicated and complex and costly<sup>2</sup> and naturally it tended to be beyond the capacity of an ordinary individual.

With the passage of time there developed another important religious literature known as "Purāṇas" which "are rooted in Vedic literature"<sup>3</sup>. "They are for later Indian religion known as Hinduism, what the Veda is for the oldest religion or Brahmanism"<sup>4</sup>. They are styled as the *pañcamaveda*<sup>5</sup> and are composed for the benefit of women and Śūdras, as the Vedas were tabooed to them<sup>6</sup>. They display a very radical and

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1. Vide E.O. JAMES, in «Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics», Vol. XI, p. 1.

2. Vide K.R. POTDAR, *Sacrifice in the Rgveda*, Bombay, 1953, pp. 279ff.

3. M. WINTERNITZ, *A History of Indian Literature*, Vol. I, Calcutta, 1927, p. 518.

4. M. WINTERNITZ, *op. cit.*, p. 517.

5. *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa*, 3.12.39.

6. *Devībhāgavata-Purāṇa*, 1.3.21.

catholic attitude and outlook in the matter of religious activities by prescribing various substitutes which lead to the achievement of the same or comparable rewards promised by various sacrifices. One may say that they were short cuts. Purāṇas elaborate the doctrine of *bhakti*<sup>7</sup> and it is in the context of *bhakti* that the *vrata*s gain in significance.

The vocable *vrata* is traceable to the RV and it means the "laws or ordinances supposed to be laid by all gods or by individual gods"<sup>8</sup>. *En passant* it may be noted that *dharman* which meant "religious rites or sacrifices or fixed principles"<sup>9</sup> came to be an all-embracing conception and *vrata* came to be restricted to "sacred vows and rules of conduct to be observed by a person as a member of the community or an individual"<sup>10</sup>. With the passage of time "in many places in all the Saṁhitās (other than Ṛgveda) and in the Brāhmaṇas and Upaniṣads generally the ordinary senses of *vrata* are two: viz. (1) religious observance or vow or restrictions to food and behaviour, when one has undertaken a religious vow, or (2) the special food, that is prescribed for sustenance, when a person is engaged in a religious undertaking, such as cow's milk, *yavāgu* (barley gruel) or the mixture of hot milk and curds (called *āmīkṣā*)"<sup>11</sup>. The concept of religious observance led to a further semantic expansion, viz. "a proper course or pattern of conduct for a person and an *upavāsa*, i.e. sacrificer's staying at night near Gārhapatya or fasting"<sup>12</sup> in times of Brāhmaṇas. The Śrautasūtras, Gṛhyasūtras and Dharmasūtras endorse the semantic contents of *upavāsa*<sup>13</sup>. It denotes in the Mahābhārata a religious undertaking or a vow having certain restrictions about food or behaviour, whereas in the Manusmṛti, Yājñavalkyasmṛti and other Smṛtis

7. Vide H.D. VELANKAR, *Ṛgveda Maṇḍala VII*, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Bombay, 1963, Introduction, pp. i ff; P.V. KANE, *History of Dharmaśāstra* (= HDS), Vol. V, Part. II, Poona, 1962 pp. 950ff.

8. P.V. KANE, HDS, Vol. V, Part. I, Poona, 1974 p. 21; for discussion *vide ibidem*, 1ff., S.S. BHAWE, *The Soma-Hymns of the Ṛgveda*, Part III, 1962, Baroda, pp. 39-40; *vide* also M.P. SCHMIDT, *Vedisch vrata und Awestisch Urvāta*, Hamburg, 1958.

9. P.V. KANE, HDS, Vol. V, Part. I, p. 21.

10. P.V. KANE, HDS, Vol. V, Part. I, p. 21.

11. P.V. KANE, HDS, Vol. V, Part. I, p. 23.

12. P.V. KANE, HDS, Vol. V, Part. I, p. 25.

13. P.V. KANE, HDS, Vol. V, Part. I, p. 26.

it came to denote some expiatory rites and rules connected therewith<sup>14</sup> and from at least first centuries of the Christian era onwards the vocable came to signify a "religious undertaking or vow observed on a certain *tithi*, week-day, month, or other period for securing some desired object by the worship of a deity usually accompanied by restrictions as to food and behaviour"<sup>15</sup>. According to the Dharmasindhu (p. 9) a *vrata* is a kind of religious rite consisting of the *pūjā* and similar things.

In the Purāṇas several *vratas* are described; to illustrate, the Matsya-Purāṇa (= MP), which is one of the oldest Purāṇas and is datable generally from 300 A.D. to 600 A.D., describes, for example, Madanadvādaśīvrata, (ch. 7), Nakṣatrapuruṣavrata (ch. 54); Ādityaśayanavrata (ch. 55), Rohiṇī-Žandraśayanavrata (ch. 57) etc.<sup>16</sup>

A study of the *vratas* in the Purāṇas shows that it was a vow or a religious rite performed on a specified day in a specified manner which involved *upavāsa* (fast) and *pūjā* also. A *vrata* is said to be the best *lokaśādhana* and the *bhogaśādhana* as well as the means of highest *siddhi* and also of the acquisition of heaven<sup>17</sup>. In this context one is reminded of the Vedic injunction, viz. *svargakāmo yajeta*<sup>18</sup>. A study of the institution of Vedic sacrifice reveals that it has certain characteristics and features, which may be briefly referred to here. Certain sacrifices were daily ones, e.g. five great sacrifices etc.<sup>19</sup>, while others were periodical, e.g. new-moon, full-moon sacrifices etc.<sup>20</sup>, and they were believed to yield certain rewards. These sacrifi-

14. P.V. KANE, HDS, Vol. V, Part. I, pp. 27ff.

15. P.V. KANE, HDS, Vol. V, Part. I, p. 28.

16. There is a very rich literature on *vratas* (vows); vide P.V. KANE, HDS, Vol. V, Part. I, pp. 57ff; Lakṣmīdhara Bhaṭṭa, *Vratākāṇḍa of Kṛtyakalpataru*, (edited by K.V. Rangaswami Aiyangar) G.O.S. CXXII, 1953, Introduction, pp. xxvi-xvii; for a list of *vratas* vide P.V. KANE, *op. cit.*, pp. 81ff.

17. *Vratākāṇḍa of Kṛtyakalpataru*, pp. 1-2; 4-5 ff.

18. Vide A.B. GAJENDRAGADKAR and R.D. KARMANKAR (eds.), *The Arthasaṁgraha of Laṅkāṣi Bhāskara*, Notes, pp. 101ff.

19. Vide RAM GOPAL, *India of the Vedic Kalpasūtras*, Delhi, 1983, pp. 387ff.

20. Vide RAM GOPAL, *op. cit.*, pp. 399ff.

"Daily and periodical sacrifices described in the Gṛhyasūtras are generally regarded as obligatory". On the contrary "the special sacrifices dealt with in the Śrautasūtras are optional and their performance is connected with certain circumstan-

ces involved the use of prescribed *mantras* at certain points of ritual: e.g. the person who is going to set up the *Gr̥hyāgni* has to carry forward the fire with the words *bhur bhuvah svaḥ* according to the *Gobhilaḥgr̥hyasūtra*<sup>21</sup>.

Oblations are to be offered in the sacred fire. These oblations may consist of milk, butter, grains, animals like goats etc., as the case may be<sup>22</sup>. A *homa* was also a part of the institution of sacrifice<sup>23</sup>.

The *dakṣiṇā* or the sacrificial fee was also one of the features of the sacrifice and the *Khādiragr̥hyasūtra* lays down that the *dakṣiṇā* should be given as much as one can conveniently afford<sup>24</sup>. *Upavāsa* (fasting) was also one of the features, e.g. "before the performance of the new moon and full moon sacrifices the sacrificer and his wife have to observe a fast"<sup>25</sup>. Time-element was also another feature of this institution: e.g. in the context of the *Śravaṇā* ceremony it is laid down that the *sarpabali* should be performed every year or every six months or every four months or every season or every month in the rainy season under the asterism *Āśle* (-re-)ṣā according to the *Baudhāyanagr̥hyasūtra* (3.10.2)<sup>26</sup>. A performer had also to observe certain restraints during the period of the sacrifice. In the *Agrahāyaṇī* there is a ceremony of *pratyavarohana* (ceremony of re-descending) and it is directed that the performer may not sleep on high bedstead and may sleep on the ground. In some other case the sacrificer had to observe restrictions regarding food and drink, bath, sleep and sexual intercourse during the whole period of the sacrifice<sup>27</sup>. Sacrifices are said to yield certain rewards, e.g. according to the *Āśvalāyana-gr̥hyasūtra* and the *Pūraskara-gr̥hyasūtra* the *Sūlagava* sacrifice is said to

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ces and occasions in the life of an Aryan householder". RAM GOPAL, *op. cit.*, p. 425. The optional sacrifices are, for example, *Caitya-yajña*, *Sītayajña*; vide for details, RAM GOPAL, *op. cit.*, pp. 424ff.

21. RAM GOPAL, *op. cit.*, p. 381.

22. RAM GOPAL, *op. cit.*, pp. 417, 406, 407.

23. Vide RAM GOPAL, *op. cit.*, pp. 381ff.

24. Vide RAM GOPAL, *op. cit.*, p. 403.

25. Vide RAM GOPAL, *op. cit.*, p. 400.

26. Vide RAM GOPAL, *op. cit.*, p. 404.

27. Vide RAM GOPAL, *op. cit.*, p. 410; vide also *The Śrauta Ritual and the Vājapeya Sacrifice*, Poona, 1955, p. 13.

bestow heavenly rewards, cattles, sons, wealth, long life and fame on the sacrificer<sup>28</sup>.

Now let us have a look at the salient features of the institution of *vrata* (vow) as reflected in the massive literature of Purāṇas. The observance of a vow involves certain physical controls and restraints, e.g. it is laid down in the context of the Nakṣatrapuruṣavrata (MP. ch. 54) and the Ādityaśayanavrata (MP. ch. 55) that the observant of the vow should take oilless and saltless food; he should avoid meat-eating and *vittaśāṭhya* (MP. 54.28; 55.17). In the context of the Rohiṇī-candra-śayana-vrata it is laid down that the observant should sleep on the ground (MP. 57.14). An *upavāsa* (fasting) is also another feature; for example, in the context of the Nakṣatrapuruṣavrata an *upavāsa* is laid down (MP. 54.1, 20); but the Purāṇas exhibit a liberal attitude, when they declare a concession that the diseased and/or disabled may take food at night (MP. 55.2). After the completion of a *vrata* the *pāraṇā* is also prescribed (MP. 55.9). Time-period is also laid down for observing vows. It is said that the image of Vāsudeva is to be worshipped in the Mūla-nakṣatra after the *Brāhmaṇa-vācana* in the month of Caitra (MP. 54.8). Among the various materials used in the performance of a vow a mention may be made of cow's urine, ghee, cow's milk, curds, sesamum seeds, *kuśa*, water, Śirīṣa flowers, Bilva-leaves, etc. (cf. MP. 57.5 etc.). A bath is also prescribed to a performer (cf. MP. 57.5). During the ritual of the vow various deities and their images are worshipped with their different limbs, e.g. image of Vāsudeva (cf. MP. 54.7, 9; 55.7ff.), Sūryārcā on the Śivaliṅga (cf. MP. 55.5. Ādityaśayanavrata) etc. During the ritual Purāṇic *mantras* as well as Vedic *mantras* are employed: e.g. *Somāya varadāyātha Viṣṇave ca namo namaḥ* (MP. 57.6) in the Rohiṇī candra śayana-vrata (MP. ch. 57). Vedic *mantras* like *āpyāyasva* (RV. 1.91.16) are also recited (*vide* MP. ch. 57.5; 70.54). Moreover, certain Vedic hymns, e.g. Rātrisūkta, Puruṣasūkta, etc. were also recited (MP. 58.34). *Dakṣinā* is one of the important items of the *vrata* – performance. Brahmins are recommended as worthy recipients of the *vrata*-gifts and in this context Purāṇas lay down that the recipient Brahmin should be a devoted (*bhakta*) one and

28. Vide RAM GOPAL, *op. cit.*, p. 432.

of pure character (cf. *dānta*). He should not be characterless, hypocrite, censurer etc. (cf. MP. 55.29ff). He should be a Brahmin with a wife and a family (cf. MP. 71.15 etc.). The observance of the vow was open to all, i.e. man, woman: married, unmarried or a widow: irrespective of caste (cf. e.g. MP. 54.4, 5; 55.31; 57.6 etc.). *Śraddhā* and *bhakti* are emphasised in a vow. There were various motivations for observing vows; e.g. acquisition of *dharma*, *artha*, *kāma*, liberation (cf. MP. 54.2, 5; 57.27), health, beauty, long; life (MP. 54.3; cf. 54.31), annihilation of sins of all types (MP. 56.1; 54.30; 55.30), peace and enjoyment (MP. 57.24), acquisition of various celestial regions (cf. MP. 54.29), absence of separation from sons, wife, relatives, freedom from disease and sorrow etc. (cf. MP. 57.1; 53.31 etc.). As rewards of the observance of various vows in addition to the purpose for which they were observed, a mention may be made of the rewards equivalent to the performance of great sacrifices like Agniṣṭoma, Vājapeya, Atirātra, Aśvamedha, Rājasūya etc. (vide e.g. MP. 58.53ff). This equivalence in rewards deserves to be noted.

The foregoing discussion tends to suggest that Purāṇic vows inherit many salient features of the institution of sacrifice and supply a brilliant substitute. It is significant to note that some of the *vratas* promise the rewards of the great costly sacrifices to the observant of a vow concerned. From the social point of view *vratas* are permitted to all the members of the society irrespective of sex, *varṇa* and marital status. The institution of *vrata* reflects the social and socio-economic conditions and religious activities and to a certain extent it implies an ideological development.